

Visiting Sara by eliask

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Summary:

Eleven and Hopper visit Sara's grave.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

This is a two-part work. Chapter 1 is set in the summer after Season 2. Yes, El's still being "safe" this year, but I imagine that as the year goes on she will be allowed to go out more and more, as long as she's supervised.

Here is an excerpt from a poem to get us in the mood:

*"How many are you, then," said I,
"If they two are in heaven?"
Quick was the little Maid's reply,
"O Master! we are seven."*

*"But they are dead; those two are dead!
Their spirits are in heaven!"
'Twas throwing words away; for still
The little Maid would have her will,
And said, "Nay, we are seven!"*

-William Wordsworth, "We are Seven"

The car crunched over gravel, kicking up dust. Hopper shut off the ignition and stared out the windshield, memories rushing over him. He finally cleared his throat, picking up the bouquet of pink flowers beside him. "Ready, kid?"

El nodded solemnly. "Ready."

They got out of the car, the hot air gusting over them. After that first year, in which he had visited often, he came just once a year. To him, Sara's grave was always like this: hot, and spilling with sunshine. It was, however, a huge change from the air-conditioned car, and El

blinked the sticky, hot air from her eyes. "She was sick in the summer," Hopper explained to El, who was covering her face from the sun with her hand. The bright light made her look even fairer than usual. He frowned, then dug back into his glove compartment, grabbing a hat. "Here, I – wear this."

He could tell El was trying hard not to roll her eyes but she dutifully put on the hat. Her curls had grown out, becoming wavier and looser, and now almost reached her shoulders. He tugged down on the cap's visor, making her glare at him in mock annoyance.

They started to walk, El following close behind him, the only sound the gravel under their boots and the sounds of distant cars and families further out in the parking lot. They soon stepped onto a cement path curtailed by perfectly manicured grass, tall thick trees, and the short, marble headstones, fanning out over the rolling hills.

In his other hand, Hopper held a crushed, yellowed copy of the cemetery directory. He smoothed it out, following the names and dates with his finger. "This way," he directed after a moment.

They walked for a while, stopping every now and then to take a swig of water. Hopper knew he was heading in the right direction when he started to recognize the names on the grave markers. *Iris Gibby, 1921-1975; Thomas Platt, 1906-1977 and Emma Platt, 1904-1978; Curtis Stinson, 1899-1971.*

He stopped. "We're here," he called.

*In Loving Memory
Sara Madeline Hopper
1971-1978
Beloved Daughter*

"We're here," Hopper said again, unnecessarily this time. He crouched down over Sara's grave, placing the bouquet over her headstone.

"Pink camellias," he said, half talking to El and half to Sara. He played with the blue hairband around his wrist. "See, pink's her

favorite color. She has this little bike with pink streamers. God, when she got sick, everyone sent her so many flowers. All pink. Her hospital room was like a fucking florist.” He swallowed, suddenly feeling contrite for swearing. “Sorry about that, Sara. I know you liked them. The smell was a lot for me.” He chuckled, then became serious. “You were so sad when the doctor took them away. I know it’s stupid, and the groundskeepers or whoever are just going to throw these away, too. But I know you deserve to have them. Since they’re your favorite.”

Sara’s grave overlooked a small lake. Today, the heat made the lake shimmer and the wind formed small waves. They’d chosen this spot in part because of that lake. Sara loved to swim. *Water child*, they’d call her. The pads of her fingers were always puckered.

El fidgeted with her hat. “Should I stay?”

Behind her, he heard a family approaching, and the sound of squealing and children. He shut them out. Even though he had El now, and he’d learned to tolerate – hell, even like – her friends, it was still hard to be around kids. Especially today.

“Course you should,” Hopper answered her. “I drove you all the way down here, didn’t I?” He breathed out. “Sara would have liked you,” he said. “You two would of have been best friends. Would’ve have been together all the time, making trouble. Or I don’t know. Doing girl...*stuff*. Painting each other’s nails. Makeup. Gossiping about boys. Watching soap operas.”

In fact, it was very difficult to imagine his daughter at the age she should have been, at fourteen. She was forever seven-years-old, school spelling bee champion and storyteller. Forever at an age where she still loved to play with Dad.

“Like us,” El deadpanned.

“Exactly,” Hopper said, appreciating that. He’d watched his fair share of soap operas over the past two years, and heck, he actually enjoyed them, as long as El was there, too. And they’d done quite a bit of talking about boys, though he supposed gossip wasn’t the most accurate word for *arranging tutoring sessions with his daughter’s*

boyfriend.

He still wondered about it sometimes. If taking in El, making her his *daughter*, was a betrayal to Sara. In dark moments, he'd wonder if he'd traded one child for another. A child who had a childhood but would never grow up, for a child who never had a childhood but who deserved the world. And dammit – El had a bright future. He'd bring down the sky for her. He knew she deserved it not just because Sara had died at age seven and any concept of future had died with her, but for El's own sake. Not because she had merited it, though of course she had, but because a future was a fundamental human right. There was something healing about having her here with him now at Sara's grave. It was an acknowledgement of past and present, neither usurping the other. It just was. It soothed him, washing his fears away. His two daughters. Together.

"El," he said gruffly. "I'm really glad you're here, you know that?"

El nodded and smiled her small smile. She never exaggerated, and the concept of acting in certain ways to fit certain social situations baffled her. When she smiled, she meant it. "Yes."

"I mean..." He swallowed thickly. God, and he said words were hard for her. "Thank you."

She started to reply when they were interrupted. "Jim?"

Hopper turned around. He wished he hadn't. "Hey, there, Diane," he said, putting some false enthusiasm into his voice. He knew she'd see through it. He really didn't care.

"It's been a while. You look good. Smoking less?" Diane brushed a sticky piece of blonde hair from her eyes. Beside her, Bill stood there with a stroller, the baby kicking his feet inside of it. "It's funny running into you here."

What do you say to your ex-wife and her family on the anniversary of your daughter's death? "I'm here for Sara," he said gruffly. Diane hugged him; he patted her on the back. She pulled away, reaching into her bag and placed a bouquet of her own on Sara's grave. It was bigger than the one he'd picked out, with white and red flowers

mixed in with the pink. He couldn't help the lump in his throat and the feeling of competition, wondering if his bouquet looked small and cheap in comparison, as if that cheapened the way he felt about her. Which bouquet would she have preferred?

"Sara loved flowers," Diane said softly. He couldn't disagree with that. Still, a part of him that corrected her tense: *Sara loves flowers*.

The baby moaned, and Diane turned around, fussing over him. She pulled him into her arms. Hopper had never seen the baby before. He was bigger and ruddier than he expected. "He is so rambunctious today," she said, bouncing him. "Who is this?" she asked, not unkindly, towards El.

Hopper moved a bit closer to her, protectively. "This is my daughter, El," the name slipping out. He usually introduced her by her legal name, Jane, not just for her protection but to let her decide for herself if she wanted to share her preferred name.

Diane and Bill nodded at that, looking unsurprised. "How old are you, Elle?" Bill asked.

"Fourteen," she said.

They both nodded again. Diane's eyes shifted to Sara's grave and then back. "So...what grade is that?" Bill asked. "Sorry, it's been a while since we've been around big kids." He chuckled idiotically at that.

El looked confused at being called a big kid, but she knew the answer to the question. In fact, she'd been practicing that one for almost a year. "I'm starting high school this fall."

"*High school*," Diane said wonderingly, and Hopper knew she was imagining Sara starting high school too. He knew she'd be excited about it – she was a smart kid, their Sara.

The baby was truly squirming in her arms now. "All right, I'll put you down," she told him. She placed him on the grass, where he toddled a few steps before tumbling forward. "Oh it's all right," Diane said to El. Hopper looked to El, catching her terrified expression. "That's how they learn. See, he's coming toward you now," Diane explained.

El stood there, ramrod straight and totally awkwardly as the baby switched to a crawl and made his way to her feet, planting himself there. Her reaction was almost funny if it wasn't also a little sad. She hadn't seen many babies, period. Not many of them in a lab.

El had been a baby in a lab once.

"You can hold him, if you like," Bill said. Diane was already coming over. She picked the baby up and held him next to El. El looked at her nonplussed, eyes scared.

Hopper started to defend her. "Hey, she doesn't want to – "

"Just hold out your arms like this," Diane directed, and he watched as El slowly took the baby from his ex-wife. When he was secure in her grasp, Diane took a step backwards. El gazed down at the baby seriously. Suddenly, the baby grabbed onto her hair, twisting it.

"Hey!" she exclaimed.

Bill and Diane laughed. "Pauly's a grabber," Bill said.

Diane nudged him. "Like his dad." To El, she said, "You want me to get him off you?"

Paul was already disentangling his fingers from her hair and was squirming again, and El looked at a loss. Diane took him from El and placed him back down on the grass, where he immediately started toddling and crawling around.

There was something symbolic about it, being here with his ex-wife and her new family, their baby, and El. El holding a baby for the first time. They weren't all family, not exactly, but they were connected. Connected to Sara. He was suddenly glad that Diane, Sara's mom, was here. That Sara could see them all together like this, making silly jokes and cooing over Paul. It made the awkwardness worth it. Ultimately it was all for her.

Diane stuck her hands in her pockets, a nervous habit of hers. "What are you doing for lunch, Jim?" The wind whipped at her hair.

"We're just-"

“Eggos,” El said.

Diane and Bill burst out laughing again. “She’s *funny*,” Bill said appreciatively. His expression became slightly more serious. “We brought a picnic, and you know how Diane is. She brings too much.” Diane swatted his arm.

Yes, Hopper did know how Diane was. How she had been, when she had been his wife.

“Anyway,” Diane continued. “When we’re done. Want to join us?”

Hopper thought about that, joining them for a picnic on the anniversary of his daughter’s death. He didn’t have to look at El to know she was salivating at the thought – she might be a little thing, but she could eat. He nodded, watching his ex-wife’s fat, happy baby crawl on the ground. “Yeah. Yeah, I’d like that.”

They stayed there at the grave for a while longer, chatting and talking to Sara.

2. Chapter 2

Two years later

The car crunched over gravel, kicking up dust. Hopper pulled the key from the ignition. For a moment he let himself stare out the front windshield, taking in the familiar view, memories rushing over him. Wondering at the right turn his life had taken. Picking up the pink bouquet, he turned around to the backseat. “You ready?” he called.

“Ready!” the three of them called. Somehow they all fit into that backseat, El squeezed in the middle between Will and Jonathan.

They got out, car doors slamming, testing the gravel under their shoes, griping about the heat.

“You know the way?” Joyce asked, pulling her hair back into a ponytail and taking off her sweater to reveal the sleeveless shirt underneath. The sticky, hot air already clung to them, the wind blowing dust and sweat into their eyes.

Hopper nodded to his wife, pulling out the yellowed directory from his pocket. “She’s towards the middle, left hand side.” He turned back to the kids. “I don’t want any of you getting burnt,” he said sternly. “Hats. On.”

They grumbled dramatically but reached all the same into the trunk for baseball caps. He marveled at them. Will and Jonathan now towered over El, who hadn’t grown far beyond her height at thirteen. Will and El were in between their sophomore and junior years of high school, and Jonathan was going into his third year of college.

El’s wavy hair now hung nearly to her waist, because she *hated* cutting it. Despite all the tutoring she’d received, El never became particularly academic, which didn’t bother Hopper, as he’d never been much for studying, either. Given her background, it was still hard for her to see the point of the academic aspects of school. She had, however, discovered a genuine love of and talent for choir. In song, she expressed herself in a way she still struggled to do in speech.

Will had started a robotics club, and led Hawkins High to its first state-wide battle robot competition win. His real passion, however, was for stories and art. At home and at school, he spent hours developing his writing and drawing talents, and was now seriously considering art schools. Jonathan was back home for the summer from NYU, where he studied photography. Jonathan was no longer shy about his talent. His photographs had been featured in many student exposés, and he'd held numerous small jobs as a photographer at events.

Joyce nudged Hopper, a knowing look in her eye. He wasn't embarrassed about being caught. He was proud of them, of the people they were, and the people they were becoming.

The five of them made their way from the gravel parking lot to the winding cement path. Now they were the loud family he used to hate. On the way, Hopper occasionally referred back to his directory as they made the yearly pilgrimage. He started to recognize the turn of the path and the names on the gravestones and knew he was close.
Iris Gibby, Thomas Platt, Emma Platt, Curtis Stinson –

Sara Madeline Hopper

"We're here," he called. The others hushed, gathering in a semi-circle behind him.

The wind had died down. The lake overlooking Sara's grave would have been still if not for the small flock of black birds that claimed it for the day. Some ducked their heads in and out of the water, squawking and splashing, cleaning themselves and hunting for fish. Others swam in small circles, clustered close to one another.

He crouched down and lay the pink roses down by her gravestone. "We're all here," he told Sara. He cleared his throat, feeling somewhat self-conscious for the first time. He'd never visited her with such a large entourage before. It was just him and her, he reminded himself. Just a dad and his daughter. "You're sixteen. Isn't that crazy?"

He still couldn't picture it. In a very real way, Sara would always be seven-years-old. But now, living with two teenagers, he'd gained a

much better sense of what Sara's high school years might have looked like. He imagined teaching her how to drive, what clubs she might join, what she'd do with friends after school, if there would be someone special in her life, whether and where she'd attend college.

"You know El," he said to Sara. "These are your brothers, Will and Jonathan."

It was powerful to gather here. He with his wife, two sons, and two daughters. Sara was as big a part of their family as she had always been, but occasionally he still worried about her thinking he'd betrayed her and the life they'd had.

However, he now saw his old thinking about it was wrong. He used to worry that by adopting El, he was replacing Sara. Now he realized he'd never been trying to replace her at all. In fact, he couldn't, even if he had wanted to.

From the very beginning, Sara had changed his life dramatically. He and Diane weren't expecting a child. Holding her in his arms on the day she was born, Hopper had committed himself to be a better cop, a better husband, a better father. None of it was easy, and he often failed himself. But everyday he'd recommit himself anew. Just as Sara had brought him and Diane together, when she was gone, the joy and love in their marriage left, too.

El was different. At first, El had changed his lifestyle in small ways. After he brought her in, he couldn't sleep around or drink as much. He had someone waiting for him at the end of the day. Someone who depended on him. Soon his feelings began he began to shift. He started to genuinely look forward to the time they spent together, whether spent listening to music, watching shows, or reading books aloud. Teaching her how to live in a cabin instead of a lab. She never talked much, but that was all right. They didn't need words to know she thought the world of him, and he of her.

Hopper needed to be needed. It was why he was attracted to the police chief life. He liked solving problems, and he wasn't afraid to use his fist to do it. He liked getting his own hands dirty. He needed to be someone's hero. He knew that, but it still took a while for him to realize that he needed all of them, too.

The aching hole Sara's death had left in his life would always remain. He would never stop grieving her, just as he would never stop loving Sara's mother and the life they had shared.

Joyce, El, and the boys didn't take their places. Instead, they were something else entirely, individuals he had grown to love fiercely and protectively. They were something wild and messy as only family could be. They made his broken heart soar.

There, together, on the anniversary of Sara's death, they were just a family. Just visiting Sara, Hopper's firstborn, their daughter and sister.